

With Elmer Left In

By SEWELL FORD

Illustrations by Frank Snapp

ALL I can say is that it was a busy day at the Corrugated. Course, I might go into details, just as I might put mustard in my coffee, or lock Piddie in the bond safe. Neither of them performances would be quite so fruity as for me to give out particulars about this special directors' meetin' that was goin' on. Speakin' by and large, though, when you clean up better'n thirty per cent. on a semi-annual, you got to do some dividend-jugglin', ain't you? And with them quiz committees so thick, it's apt to be ticklish work.

Anyway, Old Hickory has chewed up four brunette cigars the size of young baseball bats, two of the Board have threatened to resign, and a hurry call has just been sent out for our chief counsel to report, when Mr. Robert glances annoyed towards the door. It's nobody but fair-haired Vincent, that has my old place on the gate, and he's merely peekin' in timid, tryin' to signal some one.

"For heaven's sake, Torchy," says Mr. Robert, "see what that boy wants. I've already waved him away twice. Of course, if it is anything important—"

"I get you," says I, passing over to him the tabulated reports I'd been sittin' tight with. Then I slips out to where Vincent is waitin'.

"Buildin' on fire?" says I.

"Why, no, sir," says he, goin' bug-eyed.

"Oh!" says I. "Then who you got waitin' out there—Secretary Daniels or the Czar of Russia?"

Vincent pinks up like a geranium and smiles shy, like he always does when he's kidded. "If you please, sir," says he, "it's only a lady; to see Mr. Mason, sir."

"Huh!" says I. "Lady trailin' old K. W. here, eh? Must be one of the fam'ly."

"Oh no, sir," says Vincent. "I'm quite sure it isn't."

"Then shunt her, Vincent," says I. "For you can take it from me, K. W. is in no mood to talk with stray females at the present writing. Shoo her."

"Ye-e-es, sir," says he; "but—but I wish you would see her a moment yourself, sir."

"If it's as bad as that," says I, "I will."

PRETTY fair judgment Vincent has too, as a rule, even if he does look like a mommer's boy. Course, he can't give agents and grafters the quick back-up, like I used to. He side-tracks 'em so gentle, they go away as satisfied as if they'd been invited in; and I don't know but his method works just as well. It ain't often they put anything over on him, either.

So I'm surprised and grieved to see what's waitin' for one of our plutist directors outside the brass rail. In fact, I almost gasps. Lady! More like one of the help from the laundry. The navy blue print dress with the red polka dots was enough for one quick breath, just by itself. How was that for an afternoon street costume to blow into the Corrugated General offices with on a winter's day? True, she's wearin' a gray sweater and what looked like a man's ulster over it; but there's no disguisin' the fact that the droopy-brimmed black sailor was a last summer's lid. Anyway, the whole combination seems to amuse the lady typists.

This party of the polka dots, though, don't seem to notice the stir she's causin', or don't mind if she does. A slim, wiry young female she is, well along in the twenties, I should say. What struck me most about her was the tan on her face and hands and the way her hair was faded in streaks. Sort of a general outdoor look she had, which is odd enough to see on Broadway any time of year.

"Was it you askin' for Mr. Mason?"

"For a second it looked like Gladys was goin' to freeze with horror; but she just gives Valentina the once-over and indulges in a panicky little giggle."

says I, beginnin' to suspect that Vincent had made a mistake, after all.

"Yes indeed, suh," says she, sort of soft and slurry. "Ahm th' one. You jess tell him Valentina Tozier's out hea-uh. He'll know."

"Oh, will he?" says I, a bit sarcastic. "Sorry, Valentina, but I couldn't think of disturbin' Mr. Mason now. Maybe you don't know it, but he's a mighty busy man."

"Well, there!" says she. "Think of that!"

Then I knew why it was Vincent had taken a chance on crashin' into a directors' meetin'. He'd been hypnotized by Miss Tozier's smile. It ain't any common open-faced movement, believe me. It's about the friendliest, most natural heart-to-heart smile I ever got in range of. And, somehow, it seems to come mostly from the eyes; a chummy, confidential, trustin' smile that sparkles with good faith and good nature, and kind of thrills you with the feelin' that you must be a lot better'n you ever suspected. Honest, after one application I forgets the queer rig she has on, the mud-colored hair, and the way her chest slumps in. Whoever she might be and whatever she might want, I'm strong for givin' her the

helpin' hand. If I could have gone in and led old K. W. out by the arm, I'd have done it. But you couldn't have pulled him away from that Board scrap with a donkey-engine. He was unloadin' a ten months' grouch against some of Old Hickory's pet policies, Mr. Mason was, and he was enjoyin' himself huge, even if he did know he was due to be steam-rolled when the vote was taken.

"See here, Miss Tozier," says I, "it wouldn't do you a bit of good to see Mr. Mason now. He's all lathered up and frothin' at the mouth. But in an hour or so he'll be calmed down, maybe before. I tell you what; you stroll out and take in the store windows for a spell and then drift back later. Come up here if you like, or you can wait in the arcade and nail him as he comes down the elevator."

SHE thanks me real folksy, pats Vincent on the shoulder, and starts for the corridor with a long, easy swing that some of these barefoot poem dancers couldn't execute to save their necks.

"Huh!" says I to Vincent. "Put the spell on us, didn't she?"

All through the rest of that messy session I'd glance now and then at K. W. and wonder where and how he ever hap-

pened to meet up with Valentina. I was meanin' to pass him the word how she was waitin' to see him; but after he'd registered his big howl, and Old Hickory had first smeared him and then soothed him down, he left so sudden that I didn't have a chance.

Besides, I was some rushed myself. There was a lot of odds and ends to be tied up after the meetin', and two or three of them resolutions that was jammed through called for quick action early next day. That's what kept me and Piddie and Mr. Robert doin' so much overtime. About six o'clock we had coffee and sandwiches sent in, and it must have been we after seven before we locked the big safes and called it a day. Piddie had already beat it to catch a late train to Jersey, so there was only the two of us that dodged the scrubwomen on our way down to the street.

Mr. Robert had a taxi waitin' to take him to the club, and I was debatin' whether I needed a reg'lar dinner or not, when I gets a glimpse of some one leanin' patient against a pillar opposite the main elevator exit.

"Sufferin' sisters!" says I. "Valentina!"

"I beg pardon?" says Mr. Robert.

"Say," says I, "help me put a smilin' party on the track of K. W. Mason, will you? Here she is."

I expect Mr. Robert would have ducked if he could, after one view of the polka-dot dress and the rusty straw lid; but there was Valentina comin' straight at us.

"For the love of Mike!" says I. "You ain't been waitin' all this time, have you?"

"Right hea-uh," says she. "Ah reckon Ah done missed him."

"Why," says I, "Mr. Mason left hours ago. Must be something important you want to see him about, eh?"

"Ah don't know as it is," says she; "only Ah promised, ef ever Ah got to Noo Yawk, Ah'd look him up. He made me. And Ah sure would like to see Warrie mahself."

"Warrie!" says I. "Oh, gosh! Why, you mean young Mr. Mason—Warren, don't you?"

She nods.

"Well, say, that's too bad," says I. "My fault, though. But I never thought of Warrie as the one. Why, he hasn't been with the Corrugated for over a year now."

I might have added that we'd had hard work missin' him at any time. Not that he wasn't all right in his way, but—well, it was just a case of bein' more ornamental than useful. A bit thick in the head, Warrie. But it was a stunnin' head—reg'lar Apollonaris Belvidere. He had wavy brown hair, and big, peaceful brown eyes. Stood a little over six feet too, and they say that when it came to ridin' a spotted pony and swingin' a polo mallet he was all there. But in the bond department he was just under foot.

So, when he develops rheumatism in one shoulder and a specialist orders him South, it wasn't any serious jolt to the business world. And when he finally shows up again it didn't take much urg'in' from Mr. Robert to induce him to pass up his financial career for good. He was engaged to be married anyway, and that should have been enough to occupy his mind.

Where he'd run across Valentina was the big puzzle, and the easiest way to solve it was to ask her. Which I does.

"Why, at Sand Spur Point," says she. "Sounds cute," says I. "Is it on the map?"

"It's on mine," says Valentina.

"Sand Spur, did you say?" puts in Mr.

